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# Studies in Material Thinking

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*Multisensory materialities  
in the art school*

PAPER 03

*Studio ruins: Describing  
'unfinishedness'*

AUTHOR

*Chris Dorsett*

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**ABSTRACT**

*With creative practices things go wrong, work is ruined, and projects remain unfinished. Paradoxically, since failure is a matter of enhanced appreciation in the arts (e.g. Samuel Beckett's 'fail better'), neither 'wrongness', 'ruination' nor 'unfinishedness' means what it says. Building on the topographical encounters of fine art studio teaching, this article explores the intersection of ruined work, incomplete creativity and disarticulating sensations. While Jason Rhoades' messy installation art in a public gallery can evoke (like a 2005 account of abandoned factories by Tim Edensor) a problematic romanticization of unfinished and ruined work,*

*I argue that other less recognized forces are in play. In the privacy of art school studios, monitoring 'health and safety' procedures challenges all evocations of aesthetic spectacle and poetic vision. This amounts to an alternative topology of ruination that relates to Caitlin DeSilvey's 2006 descriptions of agricultural decay. Because a creative struggle is more like deSilvey's material confusion than Edensor's romanticized disorder, my article considers four further theoretical ideas in order to place studio ruins at the service of practice-based research in art schools—the muddle of 'mingled senses'; the complicit character of 'criticality'; the 'stupefying' consequences of study, and the tactical defeat of 'decreation'.*

**KEY WORDS**

*failure, ruins, art schools, health and safety, privacy, mingled senses, practice-based research.*



Left – Figure 1  
Right – Figure 2

## WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

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In the muddle of creative work, not everything necessarily 'works'. And when things go wrong the spoilt stuff is moved to one side to await re-use or disposal. Experience tells artists that messy transitory arrangements in a studio are often purposeful. This is because clarity and insight can follow frustration. However, it is also true that some messy piles of work are nothing but repositories of abandonment. But can we define the difference? The two photographs above show us that, when it comes to the purposeful and to the abandoned, accumulations of wanted and unwanted studio stuff can look disarmingly similar. I have not yet told you which image is which, but one is an installation in a gallery (*The Grand Machine*, a 2002 piece by Jason Rhoades) and the other is an untidy studio at the art school in which I work. One image is a professional gallery shot taken for promotional purposes, the other documentation made during a routine 'health and safety' inspection. The difference in interpretation and purpose is clear and yet, at first glance, how like each other the photographs are. And how emphatically both images place the messiness of creative activity before our eyes. These shared features go beyond words. Nevertheless, the two photographs do require explanation, perhaps even theoretical elaboration. They do not illustrate the same thing and my ambition in this article is to debate the difference as a conceptual shortcoming.

Whilst there is abundant literature on the aesthetics of ruins that can be applied to the creative potential of messiness, no one seems willing to argue that 'unfinishedness' is a devastating attribute of studio work. Indeed, an over-exaggerated appreciation of poetic failing now stops us encountering an actual

failure to complete. Thus my task here is to write as encouragingly as I can about studio experiences that do not 'ruin better', a term I introduce and explore below. To that end, this article will treat the procedures of the art school 'health and safety' inspector as a threshold beyond which things going wrong offers practice-based insights that far exceed the need to stay safe or respect regulative sanctions. My position is that a descriptive evocation informed by the theoretical field of visual culture is likely to approach creative messiness as if it automatically conforms to the poetry of the ruin. In contrast, or so I will argue, the materiality and topographical range of a 'health and safety' inspection steers descriptive processes rather more closely to the actual chaos of making art.

## PUBLIC AND PRIVATE STUDIOS

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Let us turn first to *The Grand Machine* (Figure 1). Rhoades' installation certainly looks messy. The piece is a confusing assemblage of scaffolding, furniture and machinery. Within this bewildering structure many of the components are items of factory or office equipment and so look eminently purposeful. But what is it all for? In Rhoades' Los Angeles studio this gear was used to manufacture and package a puzzling substance called *PeaRoeFoam* (Thorne, 2015). This 'product', or parody of one, can be seen to have spilt across the floor. Perhaps we are looking at some kind of tribute to Rhoades' chaotic productivity. Through the lens of art history, Figure 1 could be a landmark studio extracted from its original location and moved to a museum. In this regard, one might cite *My Brother/Brancusi* (1995), an installation by Rhoades in which doughnut-making equipment was compared to the

contents of the reconstruction of Constantin Brancusi's studio at Centre Georges Pompidou (Wood, 2006, p. 165). The sarcastic cross-reference to a museumified workspace certainly prompts a play on high and low culture but it should also be noted that the sarcasm only works if the installation piece is not itself a reconstruction. It follows that *The Grand Machine* should be viewed as a discrete work of art, even though the messy and transitory dimensions of the piece, like many of its constituent parts, change with each public outing.

But what about the art school photograph (Figure 2)? This also presents us with an image of creative transition and change. We see two long curtain-like forms hanging from the studio ceiling. The surrounding chaos strongly suggests that everything here is work in progress. Despite the mess it is possible to anticipate the frame-like function these rather theatrical drapes could have as part of a Rhoades-style installation. However, in complete contrast to Figure 1, the mess additionally signals a serious hazard: the student's ability to use the yellow 'combustibles cabinet' at the back has been suddenly compromised and an official order to clear away the mess must follow immediately. Such judgements are not just the prerogative of 'health and safety' inspectors, they are the everyday texture of art school teaching. I am a tutor, I do not inspect, but on a daily basis I move through spaces like this negotiating the accumulating debris of student experimentation. These miscellanies of 'work in progress', in forming chance topographies strewn across studio floors, find no topographer in me. I admit that I do not want to intrude. To muster a response seems impertinent—there are more auspicious, less private, moments for critical engagement. This is because all artists' studios are exemplary sites of

risk-taking and when things go wrong, the withdrawal of possibility can be absolute and devastating. No words match the collision of mind and matter as one's personal, political, and cultural thinking fails to produce a tangible conclusion.

## *To muster a response seems impertinent...*

Topography is a handy concept here, not just for its reference to the representation of physical features (geographical ups and downs, biological 'ins' and 'outs'), but also for the historic association of the term with carefully observed descriptions of place. The places of creative learning in an art school are, of course, the proverbial 'disaster waiting to happen' but the landscapes of risk surveyed during regulatory 'health and safety' studio audits have a topographic value that goes beyond identifying hazards. Indeed, this article proposes that these bureaucratic interventions into studio life could be theoretically repositioned to become a rich resource for practice-based researchers. The requirement to assess possible risks is the closest we get to mapping the necessary level of uncertainty needed to practice as an artist. To point this out, of course, is no indictment of the care Universities take with student welfare. The standards upheld are entirely necessary. Furthermore, when the inspectors are colleagues steeped in a culture of studio production, the process can be mindful of creative priorities. Nevertheless, the unilateral language of safety regulations, in trying to address every eventuality, throws brutally into focus the messy

business of making art. The guiding thought here is that, despite the discomfort staff and students often feel about the meddlesome characteristics of the process, there are some interesting by-products to take ownership of, and explore.

### **UNFINISHED PROJECTS, RUINED WORK**

A studio mess of the kind shown in Figure 2 prevails on different terms to those in Figure 1. As the title of my article suggests, we need words to describe the ‘unfinishedness’ that you can see in the second, rather than the first image. If people associate that lack of finish with failure, I want the word to mean something. Serious studio-based learning may require a stalling of achievement. If highly creative practitioners need to keep ‘potential’ properly ‘potent’, then an un-ending engagement with experimentation will always be valued by members of the art school community. It is not as though this proposition lacks an intellectual pedigree. Take, for example, a 2016 survey exhibition organised by New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art for their Met Breuer annex. The catalogue to *Unfinished: thoughts left visible* reminds us that the aesthetic pleasure associated with savouring creative effort in half-finished paintings is rooted deeply in European culture; that is, in the writing of the Roman scholar Pliny the Elder (Baum, 2016). On precedent alone (big names from the history of art: Titian, Rodin, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Picasso), the Met Breuer exhibition demonstrates the enduring significance of incomplete work (McCaughey, 2016).

However, no incompleteness can ever be incomplete enough if the accumulating lack of success carries this intimation of enhanced value. Samuel Beckett’s familiar formulation has us failing again and

again in order to ‘fail better’ (Beckett, 1992 [1983], p 101). This is how the revolutionary playwright added weight to the obligation he felt to keep finding a new, radical way of being expressive (Beckett & Duthuit, 1949, p. 103). The appeal of this idea is that things can go wrong, and artworks can be ruined, but the wrongness of a good thing gone wrong no longer means what it says. It is not just that ‘thoughts left visible’ can make a failure to finish seem inimitable, it is also that ruination can be transformed into something not like ruination at all. Thus we can look back all the way to Pliny to reassure ourselves that a failure to complete is a consummate aesthetic experience (Pliny the Elder, 1938 [AD 77-79], p. 367). But, additionally, we can read Georg Simmel’s essay *The Ruin* (1911) and understand that the broken columns of a ruined Roman temple demonstrate a counterpart failure to *stay* finished. According to Simmel (early sociologist, influential aesthetician and cultural theorist) the poise of half-standing building fabric, in being held between uprightness and collapse, becomes an opportunity for a profound reflection on the hubris of human enterprise (Simmel, 1958 [1911], p. 383).

With Pliny and Simmel in mind, the photograph of *The Grand Machine* raises the possibility that radically-minded creative people have to ‘ruin better’ in order to keep surpassing accepted levels of completeness. Consider Vladimir Shevchenko, the photographer who courageously entered the devastated Chernobyl nuclear power station three days after the reactor went into meltdown. This kind of ‘better’ involves physical danger, the type of risk that is off the scale of commonsense (and, indeed, safety regulations). The resulting impact of radioactivity on his equipment and film stock represents, with heart-rending tragedy, a complex update of Simmel’s hubris

(see Jane and Louise Wilson's film installation *The Toxic Camera* [2012] for a powerful evocation of what happened). Certainly, Shevchenko's fate unsettles our feelings about ruination in a way that Rhoades' tragic drug-related death does not. The chaotic Chernobyl environment cannot be thought of (with comfort, that is) as poetically 'picturesque' (Lavery & Gough, 2015, p. 2). But, then, neither can the disarray of factory and office gear in *The Grand Machine*. This also represents a far-reaching loss of aesthetic bearings. Figure 1 is not distressing in comparison to Shevchenko's photographs, even so Rhoades typifies the legacy of Beckett's requirement to 'fail (that is ruin) better'.

Here, two twenty-first century readjustments to the aesthetics of 'the ruin' seem relevant. These articles address the social and material dimensions of recently ruined places in a context that Rhoades and Shevchenko would immediately recognise. As a consequence, both can be found circulating in art schools where ruin theory continues to influence contemporary art practices. In the first, *Waste Matter: the debris of industrial ruins and the disordering of the material world* (2005), Tim Edensor deconstructs the idea of the romantic ruin and explores post-industrial wastelands through the frame of contemporary cultural geography. Like many theorists working in this field, Edensor recognises that disused sites of production are open to artistic and literary reinvention. As a result, creative ideas shape and inform his own writing. In the second, *Observed Decay: telling stories with mutable things* (2006), Caitlin DeSilvey describes an abandoned Montana farm ('not yet old enough to be interesting to [most] archaeologists') from the perspective of a cultural geographer but asks, prior to the conservation of the site, how museums should respond to a level of ongoing decay that far outstrips

the scope of conservators (DeSilvey, 2006, p. 319). Both theorists seek to radicalise our encounters with derelict environments that 'teeter on the edge of intelligibility' (DeSilvey, 2006, p. 336; Edensor, 2005, p. 312). 'Teeter' reads like Simmel, perhaps even Pliny, but 'intelligibility' does not. Apparently we have moved a long way beyond aesthetic contemplation when Edensor says that:

*... ruins and their contents are rather ambiguous, for whilst they have not been fully erased, they disassemble and rot, seem to have lost any value they may once have possessed, but simultaneously, by virtue of their present neglect and disorderly situation, there are no sanctions on how they might be used or interpreted. (Edensor, 2005, p. 317)*

Thus interpreting ruins in a post-industrial environment no longer involves grand philosophical propositions. Rather, a prevailing sense of socio-economic pointlessness (the lost value of past production) generates 'fortuitous combinations which interrupt normative meanings' (Edensor, 2005, p. 323). Once the usual interpretations have been 'interrupted', we may not be able to weave our reactions together but we will want to 'fill in the blanks' (Edensor, 2005, p. 330). Consequently, ruined factories represent a special opportunity to explore new levels of comprehension and understanding. In a parallel world, DeSilvey sifts through the scrambled debris of decades of neglect at a homestead earmarked for recognition as a heritage site. The farm's root cellar, 'a cavernous space with crumbling earth walls and a pervasive scent of sour rot', is a disordered environment that challenges museological commitments to permanence (DeSilvey, 2006, p. 329).



Attending sensitively to such non-normative experiences leads to ‘unsanctioned’ forms of description. As Edensor implies, a disassembling and rotting mess provokes interpretive departures that destabilize the reassuring sense of closure we seek from history. As we shall see below, the extent of decomposition forced DeSilvey to reconsider the museological status of rotting artefacts in relation to public display. It also complicated the topographical language she used to describe the discoveries she made during her fraught ‘archaeology of the recent past’ (DeSilvey, 2006, p. 319).

### **AESTHETIC SPECTACLE AND POETIC PROBLEMS**

But how does the approach taken by these two geographers relate to the two photographs above? In the exhibition *Jason Rhoades, Four Roads* (Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, 2015) the *PeaRoeFoam* spread out of control across the floor as if it were ‘premature waste’, the unwanted surplus that Edensor describes as ‘speeded up’ capitalism (Edensor, 2005, p. 312). Rhoades’ uncontrollable creativity spills into, and infects, the gallery; a space that Edensor might well think of as an assembly line similar to those ‘single-purpose’ realms that embodied the capitalist system (ibid.). In this sense Rhoades could be said to be ‘ruining’ the purpose of gallery display—that is, negating the degree of resolution required for audience reception. However, installations like *The Grand Machine* can only be placed on public view, and toured from one international gallery to another, with a high degree of organization. In fact, Figure 1 bears witness to a sophisticated curatorial mechanism. At the Baltic, the piece was checked regularly against a detailed

photographic survey made by the US-based team that installs Rhoades work. This topographical template ensured that each movable component (down to every grain of *PeaRoeFoam*) was kept firmly in its appointed place—a state of affairs only possible because the artist is no longer around to shrug off, or subvert, curatorial authority.

In the privacy of Rhoades’ studio these loose arrangements of materials would surely have seemed unfinished, caught between utilisation and disposal, whereas it is a patient, concentrated act of crafting on the part of the installation team that facilitates a sense of unruliness in the gallery. I would suggest that DeSilvey’s account counters the temptation of disorder achieved by this exhibition-making process. Her writing complicates what happens when everything must be sniffed, poked, and gingerly handled, before anything can be finally ‘seen’ publically as a museum exhibit. Indeed, the level of biological infestation at the farm was so high that the artefacts DeSilvey handled were really ‘ecofacts’, the ‘synchronic handiwork’ of both human and nonhuman agents (DeSilvey, 2006, pp. 321–323). To designate the rotting material as ‘handiwork’ is a revealing idea. DeSilvey’s emphasis on manual action is unlike anything in Edensor. Thus the contents of the Montana ruin do not ‘mingle incoherently’ (Edensor, 2005, p. 317). Rather, they are ‘mingled indistinguishably’ (DeSilvey, 2006, p. 320). Where the former assumes the coherence of an overview, the latter acknowledges the sensory primacy of differentiation through touch. ‘I am not particularly squeamish’, she writes, ‘and I did poke, but the edge of revulsion was never far away’ (ibid.). An overwhelming bodily reaction, in which sensory borders were abandoned, militated against a discerning perspective.

Encountering the tactile register of ‘ecofacts’ generated experiences that a curator can ‘barely articulate, let alone resolve’ (DeSilvey, 2006, p. 320). In contrast, Edensor has no problems describing disintegration. It is almost as if he were watching a film in slow motion as tiles slip their moorings, glass shatters and plaster crumbles (Edensor, 2005, p. 319). This is a significant difference—DeSilvey struggles to even provide what I have been calling a topographic description. If Edensor’s ruined factories revise, but nevertheless repeat, Simmel’s theory of poise, then DeSilvey’s rotting farm breaks loose with an anti-description, a sense of unspeakability arising within the loathsomeness of decay. Thus for an appreciative viewer of anything just about standing, the persistence of vertical structures represents an enhanced visibility that encourages, not just descriptive prose, but also an evocative romancing of ruins. However, in contrast, when the appreciative gaze is lowered to something that has fallen completely apart and then been horizontally dispersed, the inconspicuousness of the mess punctures the efficacy and romance of descriptive language.

#### **HEALTH AND SAFETY PROCEDURES**

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Consequently, we can only view the disorder pictured in Figure 2 with downcast eyes. To downgrade the appreciative gaze in this way is to accept that the base level of materiality is unspectacular. Hence a struggling art student paused before failed work might feel abandoned by the art school’s expectations of visibility. This student might also resent a curator’s definition of a successful exhibition. And yet the profession-oriented connivance of art schools and

exhibition-making (undergraduate degree shows, practice-based research outputs) can only reflect a scopic regime that, in Michel Serres’ influential book *The Five Senses* (2008), purposely underrates the body’s full sensorium. In fact, Serres’ first chapter is an exploration of the multifarious sensations associated with the skin in relation to the apparent pre-eminence of vision. The ‘ecofacts’ on DeSilvey’s farm may have ‘mingled indistinguishably’ when handled, but Serres’ experiences become a fully-fledged ‘philosophy of mingled bodies’ (the subtitle of *The Five Senses*) when he makes skin contact. ‘I touch my lips’, he says, but ‘I can then kiss my finger’, and as a result the relationship between subject and object vibrates uncertainly at different locations (Serres, 2008, p. 22). The struggling student might well experiment with this sensorial world simply because, in failing to make something visibly upright, they had become alienated from the kind of resolution required by scopic regimes. It follows that this student would find Edensor’s descriptions of ruination unlike DeSilvey’s in exactly these terms. Once decay had been accepted as an ally, DeSilvey’s curatorial authority seems to have mingled itself with the messy remains in a manner not unlike Serres’ observation that the entire volume of a ship becomes an embodiment of the slightest hand movement made by the pilot who steers it (Serres, 2008, pp. 21-25).

In a 2010 paper at the conference *Art Schools: Inventions, Invective and Radical Possibilities* (Dorsett, 2010, unpublished) I wondered what studio-based learning would be like without the scrutinizing force of what, since 2014, we have been calling ‘curationism’ (David Balzer’s word, see Balzer, 2014). The dominant gaze of the exhibition curator sits in strong contrast to the unobserved condition of my own days as an art student in the late 1960s (so much more about making,

so much less about public display). An up-dated version of this paper (presented at Glasgow School of Art after the devastating 2014 fire) continued to debate the privacy I take to be axiomatic to studio-based study. When it comes to making mistakes, or so I argued in both papers, curatorial interpretations offer nothing to the conceptualization of a messy studio. To curate an exhibition is to measure everything in relation to the trope of achievement and the exemplary nature of the resulting exhibits triggers in students the sort of self-policing Michel Foucault attributed to Jeremy Bentham's panoptic prison. Neither papers have been published and so, as a further update occasioned by the tragic circumstances of the Glasgow fire, the theme is applied in this article to 'health and safety' inspectors exercising their authority behind closed doors.

## *...we need to distinguish a type of engagement that is not the viewpoint of a critic...*

As a conventional form of policing, the mandate in question addresses head-on the devastating breakdowns and frustrating standstills that are irrelevant to exhibition-makers. The words of caution or reproach that follow an inspection are, of course, entirely alien to the critical language of studio teaching. They do, however, represent the 'intersensoriality' of physical studio work. Like DeSilvey, the technical staff who undertake these inspections poke about and dirty their hands in the kinds of mess shown in Figure 2. They are not squeamish, and the possibility

of revulsion—well, disapproval—is never far away. A tutor's aesthetic discernment may build critically on comparable reactions but the judgements of inspectors engender something different—a subversive sense of 'criticality' (Irit Rogoff's 2006 term). Here we need to distinguish a type of engagement that is not the viewpoint of a critic (the impulse to find fault), nor the overview required when a theorist formulates a critique (the desire to puncture underlying ideological assumptions); rather, criticality is of another order—it is complicit with the exercising of institutional power (Rogoff, 2006, p. 2). Thus the student's mess I see spread out before me needs to be accepted as a defeat and cleared away, but there will be undercurrents of tactical manipulation that resist and exploit the order to put things in 'order'.

Like DeSilvey's notion of 'synchronic handiwork', criticality operates horizontally inside and across the vertical edifice of power (Rogoff's model is smuggling). Furthermore, the criticality of a struggling student muddles sensory registers. Out of sight of panoptic exhibition-making, no enhanced view of failure need follow, even if an official 'health and safety' report has to be filed. The point is that the vertical expression of curatorial resolution is no longer relevant—the untidiness of the studio is a matter of complicit engagement. In the context of impending disaster everything is gauged against the spectre of truly incomplete work. As a result, the defeat that 'unfinishedness' actually entails is a release from the enhancements of criticism and critique that the concept of 'ruining better' takes for granted.

## STUDY AND DEFEAT (FURTHER THEORETICAL IDEAS)

As one would expect, an article of this size can only function as a positioning document and, by way of a conclusion, the criticality of 'unfinishedness' requires further theoretical additions to tentatively propose an appropriate topography of 'studio ruins' in art schools. Giorgio Agamben has written a short text entitled *The Idea of Study* (1995) in which he identifies the Latin root of *studium* as a reference to the shock of a physical impact. 'Studying and stupefying', he says, 'are in this sense akin: those who study are in the situation of people who have received a shock and are stupefied by what has struck them, unable to grasp it and at the same time powerless to leave hold' (Agamben, 1995, p. 64). This thought reinforces DeSilvey's acceptance of her 'handiwork' as beyond theoretical resolution. And such thoughts could be called 'stupid' because the rhythm of study is a 'shuttling between bewilderment and lucidity, discovery and loss'; it is a 'long dwelling in potential' (Agamben, 1995, pp. 64-65).

The photographs taken by my University's 'health and safety' team capture the bewildering moments that represent, within the routine of art school life, the unbridled potentiality of a collision-like stalling of progress. I think it would be wrong to limit this documentation to an entirely bureaucratic function. It is a door opened onto studying art, onto an unfolding space of learning in which the things you create pass seamlessly into the state of being uncreated (Weil, 2002 [1952], p. 32). Thus these images have profound implications—Simone Weil's thinking on 'decreation', the topic of a key theological meditation in her posthumous publication *Gravity and Grace* (2002 [1952]), suggests that criticality would always have work

to do in relation to the levelling of artistic triumph and creative ego. Recent redeployments of Weil's idea by the poet-academic Anne Carson (2006) and the literary critic Aaron Hillyer (2013) have continued to map this subversive proposition, pinpointing the considerable existential courage it takes when novelists and poets decreate the glamorous risk-taking expected of creative professionals.

To be sure, the photographs at the beginning of this article needed to be identified and distinguished with regard to apparent glamour and actual risk. In this respect Edensor's insightful evocations have not helped as much as DeSilvey's capitulation to the overwhelmingly tactile experience of handling decay. Even Serres' attack on the pre-eminence of the eye does not separate the two images. We thought they were like each other and, indeed, both represent studio disorder convincingly enough to trigger a debate about touch. But the visual persuasiveness of the photographs is precisely why identification was necessary: at first we saw only messiness, then only art, and once we knew that art contrives disorder, we understood that failure was concealed by evocative descriptions. Thus Serres does not offer concepts that address a lack of fulfilment or defeat. When he recollects the multisensory confusion experienced during a 'near shipwreck', what happened does not seem frightening but triumphantly 'epiphanic' (Serres, 2008, p. 20).

In the end, perhaps the 'health and safety' inspection team were in the best position to acknowledge what went wrong as a stupefaction of study. It is as if they are the only viewers able to draw back the curtaining membrane of visual culture to expose the truly confusing multisensory domain of the student's studio. Here DeSilvey's acceptance of failure comes into its own. Her reflective, self-

questioning language demonstrates how to transform non-appreciation into a form of enquiry. When describing the unspeakable mess of the Montana farm, DeSilvey's authority clearly vacillated between attraction and repugnance (DeSilvey, 2006: p 320). This is where new opportunities for practice-based research beckon. 'Health and safety' inspectors are surely both fascinated and alarmed by what they find. They may well use this discomfiting experience of feeling two things at once to arrive at decisions, but such contradictions would need to be openly 'contradictory' before they could exceed regulative sanctions and help us actually research failure.

A cautionary thought comes to mind: to broach this theory of contradiction does not recuperate the notion of 'ruining better'. When 'unfinishedness' is pursued like Weil pursued 'decreativity', the intersensory character of mess has greater value to the practitioner than Rhoades' artfully displayed disorder. Attempting to carry on amidst the ruins of a day's work makes the experience of failure a 'decreative' action. Weil speaks of the need to renounce the authority of the eyes. As we saw above, visual culture takes over and enhances every ruined moment with eye-catching images and interesting descriptions. In contrast, the state of 'decreation' is understood through a convergence of bodily sensations. Writing in the 1940s, Weil's emblem is not a free-standing, sighted observer but a person moving carefully forward as they sightlessly prod around them with a white stick (Miles, 1986, p. 53). Thus the full force of 'unfinishedness' cannot be pictured at all, only prodded and poked. To 'decreate', if this action is at all conceivable in an art school, requires defeated aspiration, incomplete creativity and disarticulating sensations to intersect. This intersection is of paradigmatic value for practice-

based researchers—here we operate entirely on our own ground. No one can do this particular kind of thinking, or describing, for us. It is not the photograph of Rhoades' *The Grand Machine* that makes us intuit these ideas; nor any pre-emptory viewing of a student's messy studio by a curator: it is, rather, the humble 'unfinishedness' of a student's 'health and safety' problem that produces new forms of knowledge when things go wrong in art schools.

*...the full force of 'unfinishedness'  
cannot be pictured at all, only  
prodded and poked.*

If there is, after all, a way of describing 'unfinishedness', then my guess is that it is most likely to arise within hazy topographical assessments worked out by hand. To see before you a ready-formed path allows a guiding tidiness to suppress the messy push and pull required to cut the path in the first place. Thus my task has been to write an article that introduces the possibility of the chaotic latter rather than the tidy former. The messy business of making art with which we began was easily confused in the two photographs I illustrate. Despite the different frames of reference of the photographers, both tempt gallery-style viewing. Certainly one image was shaped by public display, but the other was the product of an internal institutional procedure and my discussion of Edensor and DeSilvey sought to define this difference. To be fair, Edensor has described reconstructed studios as being divorced from touch, smell and sound (Tate Research, 2013). Nevertheless, the two geographers' descriptions of

moving about disordered environments demonstrate just how different looking at a mess is to actually handling it.

My own commitment to walking through studios laden with unfinished work admits to an interest in the failings of production rather than consumption—to fail in the midst of creative work is an experience that has to be ‘handled’ rather than looked at (what a daunting, provocative proposition this is). No old building or half-standing structure offers a model. No artful reconstruction of a famous artist’s disordered studio will suffice. When a student’s materials are in such horizontal disarray that they become a risk to the surrounding community of practitioners, a level plane of intersensorial uncertainty requires attention. The student will definitely have to clear up for the sake of workspace orderliness. But in doing so they will also find themselves testing sensations across a fluctuating surface where creative sensibilities are muddled together by base materiality. Clearing up might simply allow the student to refresh their engagement with a troublesome project and carry on. Or, more significantly, the cathartic efficacy of a complete clear-out might favour disposal over re-use. Either way, Serres is right when he says that the multisensory laboratory of touch precludes voyeurism (Serres, 2008, p. 36). Handling a mess is a private conversation, a communion of self with self utilizing both sides of a touching surface.

To work with your hands in this non-vertical way is closely aligned to Agamben’s paradoxical combination of stupidity and study. And Weil’s concept of decreation reminds us that the handiwork of an art school practitioner has no egotistical features to map. An artist’s grasp of completion must weaken in the secluding privacy of study and this keeps the reality

of failure well out of sight of any public aesthetic of ‘ruining better’. Thus my final thought is that, here at least, practice-based thinkers have something very particular to describe and research. In an art school ‘unfinishedness’ is a unique field of topographical knowledge.

### PHOTO CREDITS

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Figure 1: Jason Rhoades, *The Grand Machine* / *THEAREOLA* (2002). Installation view (detail). Private Collection. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth and David Zwirner. Photo by Colin Davison/John McKenzie, © BALTIC 2015.

Figure 2: Health and safety documentation. Photo by Sunghoon Son. Reproduced with permission of the photographer and the Department of Arts health and safety team, Northumbria University 2016.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Chris Dorsett /**  
 Northumbria University /  
 Department of Arts, Faculty of Arts, Design  
 and Social Sciences /  
 chris.dorsett@northumbria.ac.uk

Chris Dorsett is an artist whose career has been built on curatorial partnerships with collection-holding institutions such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford during the 1980s, the Royal Swedish Armoury (Stockholm) in the 1990s, and, in the past decade, Edinburgh University's Cast Collections. He has also undertaken fieldwork residencies in the Amazon (organised with the Centre for Economic Botany, Kew [2003]) and the walled village of Kat Hing Wai (commissioned by the Arts Development Council of Hong Kong [1997-8]). As a Professor of Fine Art at Northumbria University, Dorsett writes about the interface between experimental exhibition practices and the museum sector. His publications include: 'Exhibitions and their prerequisites', in *Issues in curating: Contemporary art and performance* (2007); 'Making meaning beyond display', in *Museum materialities: Objects, engagements, interpretations* (2009); and 'Things and theories: The unstable presence of exhibited objects', in *The thing about museums: Objects and experience, representation and contestation* (2011). His most recent article is 'The pleasure of the holder: Media art, museum collections and paper money', in the *International Journal of Arts and Technology* (2017).

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